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ABSTRACT

Although the success of black jazz has been limited by its lack of recognition in the white-controlled music industry, its rhetorical development as an expression of black consciousness can be traced from the bebop of the 1940s and early 1950s, through the hard bop and free jazz of the 1960s, to the jazz orientation of the disco circuit in the 1970s. The bebop movement represented a musical protest against the image of jazz as simple folk music and expressed an awakening of racial identity in positive terms that offered an alternative to the mainstream of musical expression. Reflecting the rising tide of black consciousness, hard bop with its accent on hard blues, and free jazz with its emphasis on African rhythms and non-Western forms, both celebrated black culture in an intellectual and emotional manner. In the 1970s, many avant-garde artists currently perform on artist-owned labels, thereby maintaining greater control over their material while their music remains focused on third world themes and musical influences. In addition to valid allegations of racism in the music industry, other factors that influence the success or failure of avant-garde jazz include market economics, potential audience, and the industry's promotion of "surefire winners." (MAI)

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FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND RHETORICAL ART:

THE PROBLEMS OF AVANT-GARDE JAZZ

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If we consider that Eubie Blake, who played ragtime piano before the formal musical genre of jazz came into being, is still active as a professional musician, we can see that the history of jazz is brief. In that short time jazz developed a great diversity of substyles--from early New Orleans dixieland through free jazz and jazz-rock fusion. Whatever the common elements one selects for an overall definition of this music, one factor stands out--it is a uniquely Afro-American music. It originated from a collision of musical traditions. African rhythms blended with European harmonic concepts to produce a unique cultural artifact.[1] In a sense, jazz cannot help but to reflect and even stimulate black consciousness.[2] Developing from the black experience in this country, it is a music that expresses and is responsive to the emotional atmosphere of the black community. In a rhetorical, as well as aesthetic sense, the stimulation of black identity has been a motive behind some of the musical movements of jazz in the past thirty years. With this in mind, this paper addresses the problems of freedom of expression for this minority art form within a music industry largely controlled and geared toward whites.

In our media oriented society, control of media channels is an important institutional barrier to expression. By controlling the means by which musicians may reach a wide audience, the music industry has the power to exercise a great deal of control over popular musical expression. An artist without recordings receives no widely read reviews, no radio airplay and no recognition. Even if an artist secures a recording contract, he stands little chance of gaining a wide listenership if the industry does not promote the music. Sometimes even success can be ignored. It is perhaps one of the best kept secrets of the music industry that John Coltrane's album A Love Supreme became a gold record at the same time that Beatle-mania was at its highest tide. This control of exposure has been a point of contention in the jazz world for some time, especially when that control seems racially motivated. It was Paul

Whiteman, not Jelly Roll Morton or Louis Armstrong, that earned the media title "King of Jazz" in the twenties. It was Benny Goodman, not Duke Ellington, Count Basie, or Fletcher Henderson, who was labelled the "King of Swing" in the big band era. Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan and, above all, Dave Brubeck were the media stars of jazz in the fifties. It was not that Armstrong, Basie, Ellington, etc. did not achieve fame, for they obviously did. The thing that rankled black performers was that their fame was downplayed in the media in comparison to white artists. Their wide recognition sometimes had to wait until white musicians reaped the greatest economic benefit from the high tide of a musical style.

It was in the middle and late forties that the outrage of some black artists began to be expressed in an overt fashion. It was with the bebop movement, pioneered by Charlie Christian, Dizzy Gillespie and the legendary Charlie Parker that a true avant-garde appeared in jazz. The avant-garde in any art are those who consciously seek to expand the boundaries of that art through experimentation. Prior to the bebop movement's conscious efforts to drive jazz in a new direction for the sake of the art (as opposed to the swing era's revision of the dixieland tradition for the purposes of popular acceptance and the demands of dancers), it is very difficult to speak of an avant-garde in jazz. After the bebop revolution, it is difficult to discuss jazz without reference to the tense dialectic between the avant-garde and mainstream music. The innovators of bebop made increased use of difficult to play augmented chords, placed a heavy emphasis on improvisation of new melodies over the revamped chord structures of standard tunes (rendering them unrecognizable in many cases), and utilized wild, challenging tempos. Bebop sought to expand the horizons of jazz while improving its image. It sought to "de-minstrelize" this musical form.[3] By this it is meant that bebop was a musical protest against the image of jazz as a simple folk music or a form of mere entertainment in the dancehall or nightclub. The dance beat of the swing era, with

its accented second and fourth beats, was regarded as too restrictive for the free flowing expression of musical ideas. In bebop, all four beats of the measure were accented, freeing the musician from the requirements of the dancer in order to assert the music as a struggling art form--a music that could be listened to seriously.[4] With this, the movement asserted the intellectual respectability of black music. In the bebop lexicon, "entertainer" was a term of derision. As much as it was an aesthetic statement, bebop was also a rhetorical statement of cultural pride.

There was a further rhetorical element of rebellion in this music directed at the music industry and society at large. Critic Ross Russell wrote in 1948 that bebop was a revolt against popular dance music and the blandness of the commercial music industry.[5] There was also an implication of dissatisfaction with an industry that promoted white artists who were capitalizing on the black musical heritage. In his sociological interpretation of jazz, LeRoi Jones suggested that bebop was a rebellion against white society in general, although it was not overtly suggested in either song titles or in verbal messages accompanying the music. In post World War II America, the bitter realities of the continued social and economic depression of the black community clashed with the noble motives through which the war was justified. Bebop reflected a growing disenchantment among young blacks with the goal of assimilation into mainstream American culture.[6] In its efforts to attain the status of art, it was the musical expression of an awakening racial identity announced in positive terms, an alternative to the mainstream. In its iconoclasm, it was a call to rebels black and white to identify themselves, as an examination of Jack Kerouac's writings might reveal. Kerouac, the father figure-novelist of the "beat generation", glorified bebop as the sound of freedom incarnate.

As an iconoclastic movement, bebop was heavily attacked by many critics.[7] Its rhythms were "nervous", its melodies "nonsensical", and its performers "arrogant" (after all, they rarely announced the titles of tunes they played.)

Not surprisingly, it was music that went largely unrecorded by major record companies. Small "one owner" labels such as Savoy, Dial, and Verve did the great bulk of bebop recording, resulting in little financial reward for the artist because of limited promotional clout and distribution networks of these recording companies. Although its influence was immense in shaping the musical future of jazz, bebop was a cult phenomenon that died a quick and almost unnoticed death in the early fifties.

With the growth of the civil rights movement after the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision, the rising tide of black consciousness was revived in the music. Two schools of jazz concern us here: the hard bop (a.k.a. funk or soul jazz) movement which was akin to bebop but with an accent on a hard blues backbeat returning it to the realm of popular music; and free jazz which was the true cutting edge of the avant-garde. Hard bop was a heavily blues and gospel infected style which served to emphasize in no uncertain terms the black roots of the music. It expressed black pride through its frank celebration of black culture. African and American Black themes were announced through song titles and in the music which borrowed heavily from the music of black churches and folk blues (the blues has always been a central element in jazz but here it was presented in raw rather than abstracted form). Hard bop was an attempt to "give value to terms of existence that were considered not only valueless but shameful."[8] It was a prideful assertion of black speech patterns ("Dis Heah", "Dat Dere"), ecstatic religion ("Wednesday Night Prayer Meetin", "The Preacher"), and African roots ("Tanganyika Strut", "Dakar", "Bantu", "Airegin"). The music seemed to shout--"don't deny who you are, build identity and take pride in your culture." As with bebop, the bulk of recordings in this genre were done on small jazz oriented labels such as Riverside, Prestige and Blue Note. Even here, however, any rhetorical messages deemed too controversial were suppressed. In 1958 Sonny Rollins recorded an album entitled The Freedom Suite for Riverside. In the liner notes, Rollins

wrote that the piece was dedicated to the black struggle for freedom. The album was released but quickly pulled off the market. It was reissued with a new set of liner notes with no dedications and with the innocuous title "Shadow Waltz."[9] The time was evidently not yet right for black artists to let their feelings be known, at least, in such an overt manner.

In the late fifties and throughout the sixties, the free jazz movement grabbed the leadership of the avant-grade. The music itself proclaimed freedom from European musical convention in tis minimization of the controlling role of harmony, its use of African polyrhythms, melodic polyphony, and its use of non-Western scales and tonal centers rather than European chord structures. Unlike hard bop, which was essentially an emotional celebration, the free jazz movement returned to the "black art music" theme of bebop. This was a music that wanted to be taken seriously as the intellectual, as well as emotional, expression of black culture. It proclaimed loudly--"no, I won't play your way." The avant-garde musically announced black American independence by re-Africanizing jazz in a much deeper sense than the hard bop movement had. Its rhythmic and melodic models were consciously drawn from third world sources to symbolize the quest for identity outside of the framework of white American culture.[10] This direction paralleled rhetorical themes of black nationalism and separatism in the discourse of Malcolm X, Stokely Charmicheal, and the Black Panthers. The inaccessible nature of the music to ears accustomed to Western musical form was part of the rhetorical statement of the music, indeed, it was a deliberately emphasized point of pride.

Ironically, the free jazz movement received more attention from the recording industry than any previous segment of the avant-garde. Two major labels recorded and released this music: Atlantic records and ABC. Interestingly, ABC confined the music to a special products division--Impulse records--a practice widespread to this day. These adjunct labels rarely receive the

promotional budgets available to the main label. This has led to charges that it is no better than the old practice of issuing "race records" and that the music was recorded, not to promote seriously for sale, but to take an intentional loss for its tax advantages.[11] Such allegations of discrimination centered the issue around control of the media channels. In a controversial and widely quoted comment, outspoken tenor saxophonist Archie Shepp stated:

> Jazz is the product of the whites--the ofays--too often my enemy. It is the progeny of the blacks--my kinsmen. By this I mean, you own the music and we make it... That's what the avant-garde is all about. We're not simply angry young men--we are enraged, and I think it's damn well time.[12]

In the seventies many avant-garde artists have resorted to artist-owned labels or small independent operators (such as Nessa or Delmark records) who give the artist greater control over their musical material. Again, they suffer economically from the limited distribution and promotion that those labels can supply. Charges of racism in the music industry are still leveled but rarely with the intensity of the sixties.[13] The direction of the music remains--third world themes and musical influences predominate. The music industry's failure to adequately represent the avant-garde remains a burning concern.

The allegations of racism are, however, only one aspect of the relationship of the avant-garde to the music industry. There are additional forces to be considered for a full profile of this issue--market economics and the relationship of the avant-garde to its potential audience. The music industry exists to make a profit and it will, obviously, invest in music that will fulfill that goal. In an illuminating interview Norman Granz, one time owner-operator of Verve records and now owner-operator of Pablo records, remarked that the modern music industry's obsession with big hits and big, easy profits has been the cause of the industry's neglect of jazz, even though substantial profit can be realized by selling a small number of a large number of titles.[14] The problem seems to be conformity in a very competitive business. In the

seventies record companies sought to revise their marketing strategy away from the elusive million seller through hit or miss and market a small quantity of proven sellers. Promotion is heaped on this small number of "surefire winners" and radio stations are encouraged to restrict their play lists to accomodate these hits. This avoids the perils of "throwing a lot of product against the wall to see what sticks."[15] This cautious market obviously leaves the experimentalist as "odd man out." Even with the tremendous upsurge of jazz popularity in the seventies,[16] the industry promotes artists who have a good chance of gaining wide popular acceptance, i.e., jazz-rock fusion artists, and jazz oriented toward the disco circuit. The racial-rhetorical element can be effectively hidden because popularity and profit, not art or cultural values, are the industry touchstones. As noted earlier, even success can be ignored. In a recent interview, Archie Shepp pondered the fate of John Coltrane's A Love Supreme:

> Did you know that A Love Supreme was a gold record? And yet it never stood as a model in the studios in the way other types of music have, like Superstition (by Stevie Wonder). If that hits, everybody in town is told to make a record like that. How come it didn't happen like that with A Love Supreme? That was a gold seller but people are discouraged from making records like that. A Love Supreme indicates that there is a market for that music... What happened to those people? What did America do to them? Did they Beatle-ize them? Did they bombard them with another kind of subliminal energy to stifle that? Why aren't these models being encouraged on a really commercial level, if that gold record indicates a commercial need?[17]

Frankly, there are no clear answers to the questions raised by Shepp. As a disciple of Coltrane, Shepp has a certain amount of self-interest invested in the question. He was, and still is, an avant-garde musician whose name few recognize because the industry and the media ignored him.[18] His self-interest, however, arises from a committment to promoting black art music and the fear, shared by many artists, that the industry machine will choke off that music with neglect.

Economic pressure is one major force that inhibits expression, but the avant-garde itself sets limiting conditions which inhibit their accessibility to a wider audience. Ever since the bebop movement, the struggle to establish jazz as a legitimate art music has resulted in a paradox--the desire for a wide audience exposure and repugnance at what that means in terms of audience adaptation. In his study of the bebop jazz world, sociologist William Cameron labeled the tension between artist and audience a "controlled schizophrenia."[19] Present in the avant-garde is the mythological scenario of the uncompromising artist struggling to achieve musical excellence which will raise the audiences consciousness against the grasping hands of commercialism which panders to the baser elements of mass taste. Howard Becker noted the tendency of bebop jazzmen to regard their talent as a unique gift that only a sophisticated audience could hope to understand.[20] This hostility toward audience demands has been handed down through the different movements of the avant-garde. The mass audience and its tastes are viewed as agents of evil, urging the artist to forsake the purity of his art and pollute the gifts he possesses. The constancy of this theme can be illustrated by juxtaposing two quotations from divergent sources. First, bebop pianist Thelonious Monk:

> Play your own way. Don't play what the public wants--you play what you want and let the public pick up on what you are doing, even if it does take them fifteen or twenty years.[21]

Compare with this, the comments of jazz-rock guitarist Frank Zappa (though considered a rock star, Zappa is greatly respected in the jazz world for his musical expertise):

> I figure that a person buying my record is interested in what I am doing...and I do him a favor by doing what I feel like doing because then he hears who I am at that moment in time. If they like it, fine. If they don't, they can go out and buy another record.[22]

In the remarks of these artists there is a common element of a vision of artistic purity and value that they will not compromise to make their music more saleable. The music is an honest expression and cannot be altered, the audience must adapt to the artist or listen to something else.

Though this is a very common theme in the world of avant-garde jazz, it is not necessarily true that avant-garde jazz, as has sometimes been charged, lost touch with its audience or refuses to communicate with its audience. There is simply a communication at a different level. The music's concern with creative identity and individuality is a part of the message of this music, aesthetically as well as rhetorically. By demanding such a great degree of sophistication, however, the music endangers its ability to attract new listeners and wider recognition. This is especially true in light of the cautious marketing by major record labels who have the promotional power, when they choose to use it, to at least give an artist the opportunity to build a wide popular base. The danger to the artist who does secure a recording contract with a major label is the threat of loss of autonomy. Major media outlets, except in cases of proven sales potential, rarely allow an artist full control of the artistic direction of the product. It is often demanded by the producer that the music be shaped to fit a marketable, popular mold.[23] In view of the artistic and rhetorical ideals of many avant-garde performers, this is clearly unacceptable.

From the industry's point of view, experimental music, especially that tinged with rhetorical overtones, is rarely a popular item. At least with "message" rock of the sixties, you could ignore the words and dance to the music. The tonal clusters, pentatonic scales and complex rhythms of avant-garde jazz would require an extensive education in dance. The theme of racism in the avant-garde's criticism of the music industry, though it may well be justified, oversimplifies the nature of inhibition of expression in this case.

The rebellious aesthetic-rhetorical stance of the music in its abandonment of familiar musical conventions and third world themes creates its own limitations. When this is combined with market forces of the music industry, it is not difficult to see that the issue is complex.

Avant-garde jazz is a vital part of black aesthetic expression and it may be that the "controlled schizophrenia" of the avant-garde is necessary for its fullest expressive fruition. On the other hand, heavy media emphasis on "what will sell" may ultimately destroy the economic base of the avant-garde. It is not the music industry itself, but what that business implies about this society's antipathy to that which is searchingly creative, that can be so frightening. The impasse' between the psychology of the marketplace and the avant-garde's reaction to that psychology seems to define the nature of the inhibition of expression in this case. It is a problem that goes beyond industry vs. artist to the cultural relationships of majority and minority segments of American society.

NOTES

1. Leroy Ostransky, Understanding Jazz. (Prentice-Hall, 1977) p. 28-29.

2. Ben Sidran, Black Talk. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) p. 68.

3. Lloyd Miller and James Skipper, "Black Protest in Avant-Garde Jazz", in The Sounds of Social Change, ed. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard Peterson, (Rand, McNally, 1972) p. 32.

4. John Mehegan, "The ABC of New Jazz", Saturday Review, 39 (November 10, 1956) p. 34.

5. Ostransky, p. 200.

6. LeRoi Jones, Blues People, (Morrow and Co., 1963) p. 185-189.

7. LeRoi Jones, Black Music, (Morrow and Co., 1969) p. 18-19.

8. Jones, Blues People, p. 219.

9. Frank Kofsky, Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music, (Pathfinder Press, 1970) p. 50-51.

10. Clifford Taylor, "The Design of Culture", Encounter, 31(November, 1968) p. 41-48.

11. Donald Byrd, "Music Without Aesthetics", Black Scholar, 9 (July, 1978) p. 2-5.

12. Nat Hentoff, "The New Jazz--Black, Angry and Hard to Understand", New York Times Magazine, December 25, 1966, p. 10.

13. Account of recent Association of Recording Artists meeting in "Potpourri", Downbeat, January 25, 1979, p. 9.

14. Ira Gitler, "Norman Granz", Radio Free Jazz, November, 1978. p. 10-11.

15. "The Record Industry Sounds a Note of Joy", Business Week, December 1, 1975, p. 53-54.

16. "Jazz is Back", Newsweek, August 10, 1977, p. 48-54.

17. Bret Primack, "Archie Shepp: Back to Schooldays", Downbeat, December 21, 1978, p. 59-60.

18. Primack, p. 27.

19. William Cameron, "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session", Social Forces, 33 (Spring, 1954) p. 182.

20. Howard Becker, "The Professional Jazz Musician and His Audience", in Denisoff and Peterson, p. 248-260.

21. Nat Hentoff, Jazz Is, (Random House, 1976) p. 129.

22. Tim Schneckloth, "Garni du Jour, Lizard King and Slime", Downbeat, May 18, 1978, p. 16.

23. Donald Byrd, p. 3.